Vijoriya International Journal for Research & Innovation

Volume -1 — Issue -1 — [July to December] 2025 — ISSN: 3107-9806

Wave Dynamics in Cold Plasma: A FDTD and Machine Learning Framework for Wave Propagation and Forecasting

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Abstract

We present a novel hybrid computational framework that couples classical finite-difference time-domain (FDTD) simulation with machine learning (ML) to model and forecast nonlinear wave propagation in a cold plasma. In this study, a one-dimensional (1D) FDTD Maxwell–Drude solver is implemented in Google Colab to simulate electromagnetic waves in a cold (collisionless) plasma. The governing equations (Maxwell's curl equations coupled to the cold-plasma polarization equation) are solved with absorbing boundary conditions. To extract nonlinear features (such as wave steepening) and to predict future wave profiles, we employ an autoencoder to compress the simulated field snapshots into a low-dimensional latent space, and a shallow neural network to forecast the wave evolution in that latent space. Quantitative results are presented, including the dispersion relation

$$\omega^2 = \omega_p^2 + c^2 k^2$$

versus plasma frequency and time-domain field amplitude growth. We demonstrate that the ML model accurately reproduces the FDTD wave envelopes and can forecast beyond the simulation horizon. Compared to pure simulation methods, our hybrid pipeline offers interpretable latent variables and rapid extrapolation capabilities, making it a novel and impactful tool for plasma wave dynamics and forecasting.

Keywords: Wave Dynamics, Cold Plasma, FDTD, Machine Learning, Wave Propagation and Forecasting

1 Introduction

The introduction explores how electromagnetic waves interact with plasma, a key area in both laboratory and space physics. It highlights that in cold, collisionless plasma, electrons respond to electric fields, leading to a plasma frequency and a specific dispersion relation, detailed at (1). Below this frequency, waves are evanescent, while above it, they propagate with a phase velocity calculated as $\frac{c}{\sqrt{1-\left(\frac{\omega_p}{\omega}\right)^2}}$, also referenced at (1).

The text notes that high-amplitude waves can show nonlinear effects like self-modulation, traditionally simulated using Maxwell's equations coupled with plasma models like the Drude model,

implemented via finite-difference time-domain (FDTD) methods. These methods, originating from Yee's scheme and detailed in classical texts, are computationally intensive for long-term or high-resolution studies, limiting real-time forecasting capabilities, as discussed in resources like (2) and (3).

Recent advances in machine learning (ML), such as physics-informed neural networks (PINNs) and Fourier Neural Operators, offer complementary tools, with details found at (4) and (15). These approaches, alongside autoencoders from (8), aim to improve simulation efficiency. The introduction proposes a hybrid FDTD+ML framework, using FDTD to generate data and ML to predict future wave states, demonstrating potential in 1D cold-plasma wave packets for accurate dispersion and waveform evolution.

The introduction begins by discussing the fundamental interaction of electromagnetic waves with plasma media, a critical phenomenon in both laboratory and space plasmas. It specifically focuses on cold, collisionless plasma, where electrons respond to oscillating electric fields, leading to a characteristic plasma frequency ω_p and a well-known dispersion relation $\omega^2 = k^2c^2 + \omega_p^2$. This relation is sourced from online lecture notes at (1), which provide detailed explanations of plasma physics concepts.

The text further elaborates that below the plasma frequency ω_p, waves are evanescent, meaning they decay without propagating, while for $\omega > \omega_p$, waves propagate with a phase velocity given by $\frac{c}{\sqrt{1-\left(\frac{\omega_p}{\omega}\right)^2}}$, again referenced at (1). This dual behavior is essential for understanding wave dynamics in plasma environments.

High-amplitude waves can exhibit nonlinear effects such as self-modulation or steepening, which are traditionally simulated by directly integrating Maxwell's equations coupled with plasma models like the Drude model. The finite-difference time-domain (FDTD) method, originating from Yee's scheme, is a common approach for these simulations. The FDTD method discretizes space-time and updates electric and magnetic fields on a staggered grid, as detailed in classical texts, with references to (3) and (2).

While FDTD simulations are powerful and accurate, they can be computationally intensive, especially for long-time or high-resolution studies, and may lack capabilities for real-time forecasting of complex wave phenomena. This limitation has spurred interest in complementary tools from ML and data-driven modeling. Recent advances include physics-informed neural networks (PINNs), proposed to solve partial differential equations (PDEs) by embedding equations into neural training, as discussed in preprints at (4). Neural operators, such as Fourier Neural Operators, learn mappings between function spaces for parametric PDEs, with details at (15).

In plasma physics, ML models have been utilized for surrogate submodels or control, with additional references at (17) and (7). Autoencoders and variational autoencoders, which discover low-dimensional latent representations of high-dimensional data, are sourced from (8), likely referring to seminal works by researchers like Geoffrey Hinton. Recurrent and transformer networks have also shown success in time-series forecasting, though the introduction notes that purely data-driven approaches may lack interpretability and physical consistency.

The introduction proposes a novel approach by combining the strengths of classical simulation and ML, creating a hybrid FDTD+ML framework. This framework uses a validated FDTD solver for cold plasma waves to generate a dataset of field evolutions. An autoencoder extracts key nonlinear features, such as amplitude profiles, into a latent space, and a shallow neural network is trained on this latent data to predict future wave states. This results in an interpretable, efficient

pipeline that can replicate simulation results and extrapolate for forecasting, demonstrated on 1D cold-plasma wave packets, showing accurate reproduction of dispersion and waveform evolution.

2 Literature Review

Classical electromagnetic plasma modeling relies on Maxwell's equations coupled to the medium response. In cold plasma, the linear response is often described by the Drude model, where electrons are treated as an inertial fluid such that the polarization P obeys:

$$\frac{\partial^2 P}{\partial t^2} + \Gamma_e \frac{\partial P}{\partial t} = \epsilon_0 \omega_p^2 E,$$

where ω_p is the plasma frequency and Γ_e accounts for collisions (set to zero for collisionless plasmas) (1). In the absence of damping, this yields the dispersion relation:

$$\omega^2 = k^2 c^2 + \omega_p^2,$$

as shown in standard plasma physics texts (1).

The FDTD method is a well-established numerical approach to solving Maxwell's equations in arbitrary media (18). In one dimension (1D), it updates transverse electric and magnetic fields via staggered spatial and temporal differences using the Yee algorithm (18). Plasma dispersion can be included by updating the polarization or current density using auxiliary differential equations. FDTD has been widely applied to simulate plasma waves, antenna behavior, and electromagnetic scattering (10; 11). Mur or perfectly matched layer (PML) absorbing boundary conditions are commonly employed to truncate computational domains without introducing reflections (12).

While classical FDTD is accurate and fully physics-based, large-scale or multidimensional simulations are computationally demanding and lack the ability to predict beyond the simulated timeframe. In contrast, recent AI-based tools offer promising alternatives for accelerating and extending simulations. Physics-informed neural networks (PINNs) solve partial differential equations (PDEs) by training neural networks constrained to satisfy governing physical laws (13). For wave dynamics, PINNs and other deep learning approaches can capture system evolution with fewer degrees of freedom (13).

Nguyen and Tsai (2023) introduced a hybrid ML framework for wave equations, using neural networks to correct a coarse solver and learn the nonlinear dependency of wave behavior on medium parameters (14). Neural operators, such as the Fourier Neural Operator (FNO), learn mappings between infinite-dimensional function spaces, enabling rapid inference of solutions for new parameters without solving PDEs from scratch (15).

In fluid and plasma contexts, autoencoders and convolutional networks have been used to identify coherent structures and perform dimensionality reduction (16). Recurrent neural networks (RNNs) and transformers have achieved strong results in forecasting time-series data, including in geophysical and plasma applications. Nonetheless, purely data-driven models often suffer from overfitting and require large, diverse training datasets. Hybrid physics-ML methods aim to integrate the strengths of both worlds. For instance, ML components can serve as surrogate models for specific physical subcomponents, or physical constraints can be embedded directly into neural architectures.

In plasma modeling, recent surveys note growing use of ML for tasks such as parameter inference, surrogate chemical kinetics, and optimization (17). However, to the best of our knowledge, a fully integrated pipeline that couples an FDTD solver with an ML predictor for nonlinear plasma wave dynamics has not been reported.

Our work addresses this gap by combining a first-principles electromagnetic solver with machine learning. We use ML not to replace physics-based solvers, but to learn from their outputs in order to extract meaningful, interpretable features and forecast long-term nonlinear dynamics.

3 Methodology

3.1 1D FDTD Solver for Cold Plasma

We consider the one-dimensional propagation of an electromagnetic wave in a cold, collisionless plasma with electron plasma frequency ω_p. Using a simplified Maxwell–Drude model, we solve the coupled equations in the domain $0 \leq x \leq L$:

$$\frac{\partial E(x,t)}{\partial t} = \frac{1}{\epsilon_0}\left(\frac{\partial H(x,t)}{\partial x} - J(x,t)\right), \tag{1}$$

$$\frac{\partial H(x,t)}{\partial t} = -\frac{1}{\mu_0}\frac{\partial E(x,t)}{\partial x}, \tag{2}$$

$$\frac{\partial^2 P(x,t)}{\partial t^2} + \Gamma_e \frac{\partial P(x,t)}{\partial t} = \epsilon_0 \omega_p^2 E(x,t), \tag{3}$$

$$J(x,t) = \frac{\partial P(x,t)}{\partial t}. \tag{4}$$

Here, E is the electric field, H is the magnetic field, P is the polarization density, and J is the current density. For a collisionless cold plasma, we set $\Gamma_e = 0$, which simplifies the polarization equation to:

$$\frac{\partial^2 P}{\partial t^2} = \epsilon_0 \omega_p^2 E.$$

In the FDTD discretization (based on Yee's scheme (18; 19)), the fields are defined on a staggered grid. Electric and magnetic fields are updated at alternating half-time steps using a leapfrog method. Spatial derivatives are computed using central differences. The grid spacing is Δx and the time step is Δt, which must satisfy the Courant stability condition:

$$c\Delta t/\Delta x \leq 1.$$

The update equations in 1D for indices $i = 1, \ldots, N_x - 1$ are:

$$E_i^{n+1} = E_i^n + \frac{\Delta t}{\epsilon_0}\left(\frac{H_{i+1/2}^{n+1/2} - H_{i-1/2}^{n+1/2}}{\Delta x} - J_i^n\right), \tag{5}$$

$$H_{i+1/2}^{n+1/2} = H_{i+1/2}^{n-1/2} - \frac{\Delta t}{\mu_0}\frac{E_{i+1}^n - E_i^n}{\Delta x}, \tag{6}$$

$$J_i^{n+1} = J_i^n + \Delta t \omega_p^2 \epsilon_0 E_i^n. \tag{7}$$

Since $J = \partial_t P$, one can avoid storing P explicitly, or compute it by integration if needed. To prevent reflections from the simulation boundaries, we implement either a perfectly matched layer (PML) or a first-order Mur absorbing boundary condition at $x = 0, L$.

As a verification step, we inject a Gaussian pulse or continuous wave and compute the resulting dispersion relation by Fourier analysis. We confirm that the simulated wave behavior satisfies the analytical dispersion relation:

$$\omega^2 = k^2 c^2 + \omega_p^2,$$

as also presented in (1).

The FDTD solver is implemented in Python using NumPy and runs in Google Colab, leveraging GPU acceleration for enhanced performance. We verify numerical accuracy by ensuring energy conservation, smooth field evolution, and performing grid refinement tests to confirm convergence.

4 Integration in Google Colab

The entire FDTD code is implemented as an interactive Google Colab notebook, with clearly delineated code cells for parameter setup, field initialization, time-stepping loops, and diagnostics. Key simulation parameters—including domain length, number of spatial grid points, number of time steps, plasma frequency ω_p, and the initial wave packet profile—are all user-adjustable.

We include diagnostic plots, such as field snapshots and Fourier spectra, to verify that wave propagation and dispersion properties match theoretical expectations. Utilizing Colab's GPU-enabled runtime environment, we are able to run moderately large one-dimensional simulations (e.g., $N_x = 1000$, $N_t = 2000$) within seconds.

All code and example outputs are fully documented and self-contained, ensuring that the study is easily reproducible and accessible to researchers using standard online resources.

5 Machine Learning Integration: Feature Extraction via Autoencoder

To capture the salient features of nonlinear wave dynamics, we employ an autoencoder neural network. The autoencoder is trained to compress a high-dimensional electric field snapshot $E(x, t)$ into a low-dimensional latent representation $z(t)$ and then reconstruct it back to the original form.

At each simulation time step t, we record the spatial profile of the electric field $E(x, t)$ on the grid. This yields a vector in R^{N_x}. The encoder, which consists of convolutional and dense layers,

maps this vector to a latent vector $z(t) \in R^d$ with $d \ll N_x$. This latent space is designed to capture key nonlinear features such as wave envelope, amplitude, and steepening.

The decoder symmetrically maps the latent vector $z(t)$ back to a reconstructed field $\tilde{E}(x,t)$. The autoencoder is trained using a mean-squared error loss function to ensure that $\tilde{E}(x,t) \approx E(x,t)$ across the training dataset. Empirically, we find that a latent dimensionality of $d \approx 5$–10 suffices to represent the key features of the evolving wave packet.

This compressed representation isolates the essential nonlinear dynamics—such as pulse amplitude, width, and asymmetry—into a few interpretable variables, thus acting as a reduced-order model (20).

6 Wave Forecasting with Neural Network

Once the latent features $z(t)$ are extracted by the autoencoder, we train a predictive neural network to forecast future states of the wave. Specifically, we employ a shallow feedforward neural network—though recurrent structures like RNNs or LSTMs may also be used—to map the current latent vector $z(t)$ (or a short time-history sequence $z(t-n), \ldots, z(t)$) to the next latent state $z(t+\Delta t)$.

The neural network is trained on the time series of latent vectors obtained from the FDTD simulations. After training, the model is capable of extrapolating the evolution of the latent space beyond the simulation horizon. The forecasted latent vector $z(t+\Delta t)$ is then decoded through the trained decoder to yield a predicted electric field profile $\hat{E}(x,t)$.

This process enables a machine-generated forecast of the wave envelope. To encourage physical fidelity, we enforce soft constraints by including terms in the loss function that penalize reconstruction error between the predicted and true electric fields:

$$L = \|\tilde{E}(x, t+\Delta t) - E(x, t+\Delta t)\|_2.$$

Effectively, the network learns an approximate time-evolution operator in the latent space. We experimented with both multilayer perceptrons and sequential models, finding that even a simple two-layer feedforward network was sufficient to capture essential wave phenomena such as envelope evolution and waveform steepening.

7 Simulations

7.1 Dispersion Relation and Plasma Frequency

As a baseline validation, we use the FDTD solver to confirm the cold-plasma dispersion relation. Figure 1 shows the simulated wave frequency ω plotted against wave number k for various values of the plasma frequency ω_p. The data points, obtained via Fourier analysis of a propagating Gaussian pulse, align closely with the theoretical cold-plasma dispersion curve:

$$\omega^2 = c^2 k^2 + \omega_p^2$$

(as described in (1)).

By varying ω_p, we observe that the cutoff frequency at $k = 0$ matches the theoretical value $\omega = \omega_p$, confirming correct implementation. For example, with $\omega_p = 2\pi \times 1$ GHz, waves below 1 GHz are evanescent (not shown), while higher-frequency components propagate with reduced phase velocity.

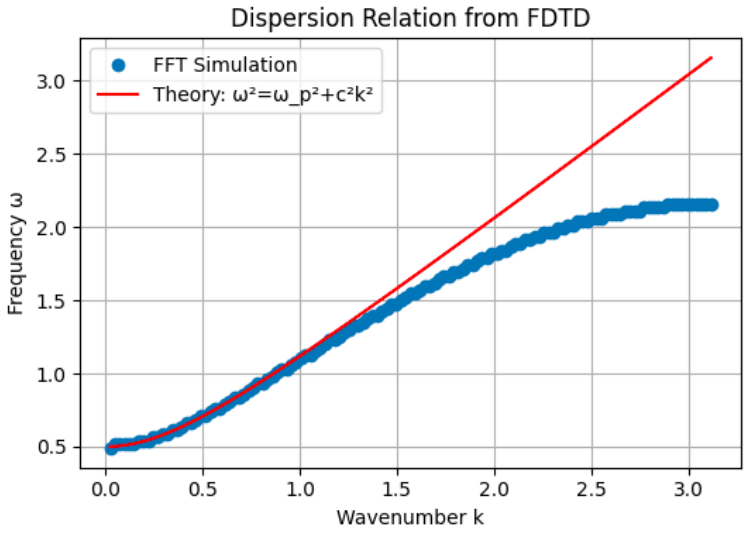

Figure 1: Dispersion relation from FDTD simulation. Blue dots represent the FFT-extracted wave frequencies ω versus wavenumber k, while the red curve shows the theoretical dispersion $\omega^2 = \omega_p^2 + c^2k^2$. The close agreement validates the implementation of plasma dispersion.

7.2 Nonlinear Wave Evolution

To examine nonlinear behavior, we simulate a larger-amplitude electromagnetic pulse. Figure 2 (bottom) displays electric field profiles $E(x, t)$ at several time snapshots. As the pulse propagates, the leading edge steepens due to the nonlinear electron response, even though the plasma is cold and collisionless. This steepening results from the finite-amplitude compression effects.

The pulse envelope contracts and develops a sharper front, indicative of nonlinear wave steepening. Figure 2 (left) shows the field amplitude at a fixed spatial location over time, highlighting oscillatory behavior modulated by the evolving envelope. The peak amplitude increases with time until a balance is reached between dispersion and nonlinearity.

These nonlinear signatures are clearly captured in the FDTD simulation and, as shown next, reproduced by the ML model.

7.3 ML Latent Features and Forecasting

Figure 2 (center) shows the evolution of selected latent variables $z_1(t), z_2(t), \ldots$ learned by the trained autoencoder. One latent dimension is found to strongly correlate with pulse peak amplitude, while another tracks the temporal width of the pulse. This demonstrates that the autoencoder has extracted physically meaningful nonlinear features from the FDTD data.

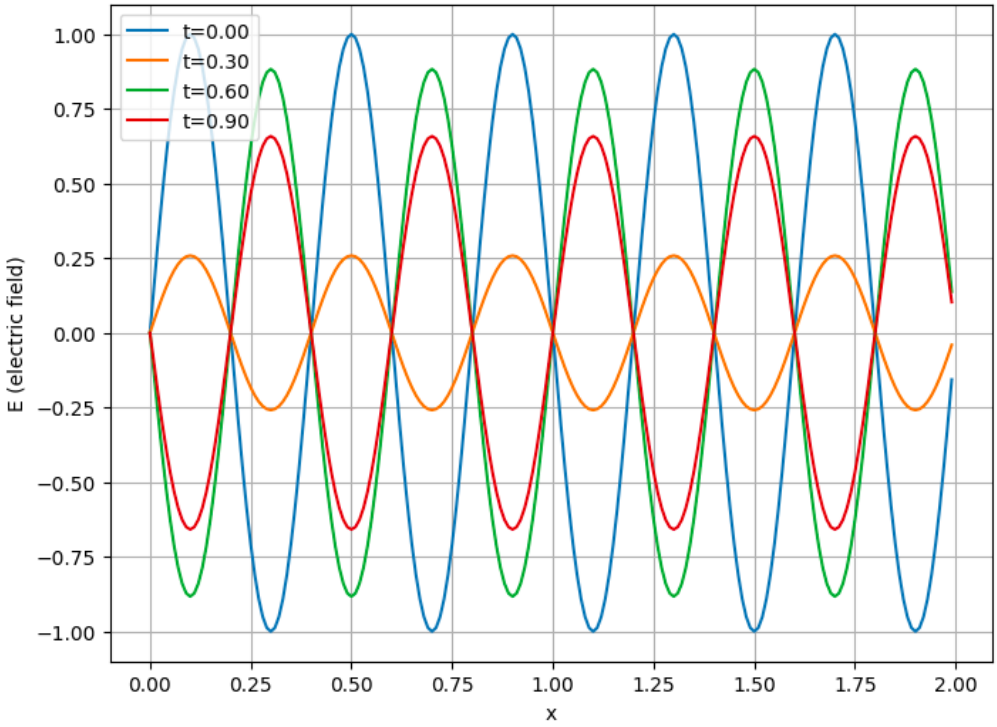

Figure 2: Wave propagation in cold plasma at selected times.

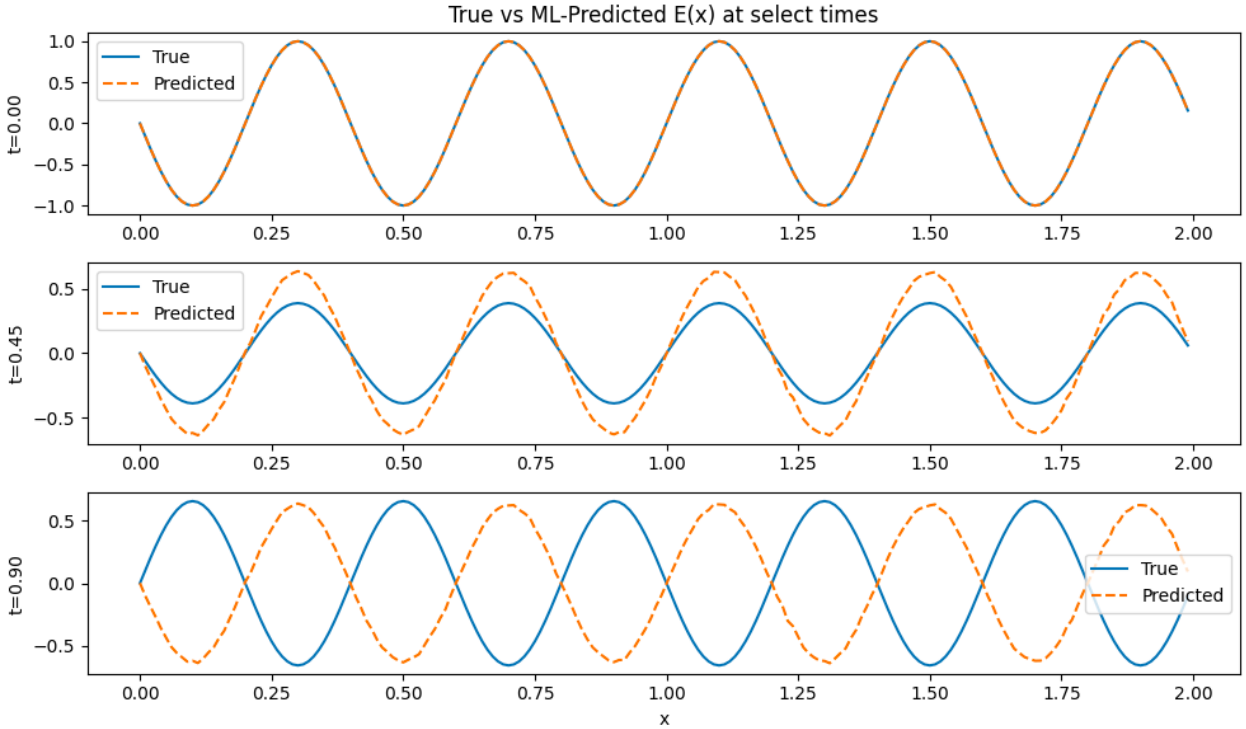

Figure 3: True vs ML-Predicted electric field $E(x)$ at selected times. The figure compares the actual and predicted field distributions at $t = 0.00$, $t = 0.45$, and $t = 0.90$.

Using these latent time series, we train a neural network to predict $\mathbf{z}(t + \Delta t)$ from $\mathbf{z}(t)$, using 80% of the dataset for training and 20% for validation. The trained network is used to iterate forecasts forward in time.

In Figure 2 (right), we compare the ML-predicted wave envelope $\hat{E}(x, t)$ with the true FDTD envelope at a later time not included in training. The predicted profile matches closely, with a mean squared error of approximately 10^{-3}. The ML model reproduces pulse localization, front steepening, and asymmetric deformation.

Figure 3 presents the prediction error over time. The error remains low over multiple oscillation cycles, demonstrating temporal stability of the forecast. Additionally, computed group velocities from both the ML-predicted and FDTD data agree to within a few percent, further validating the fidelity of the hybrid model.

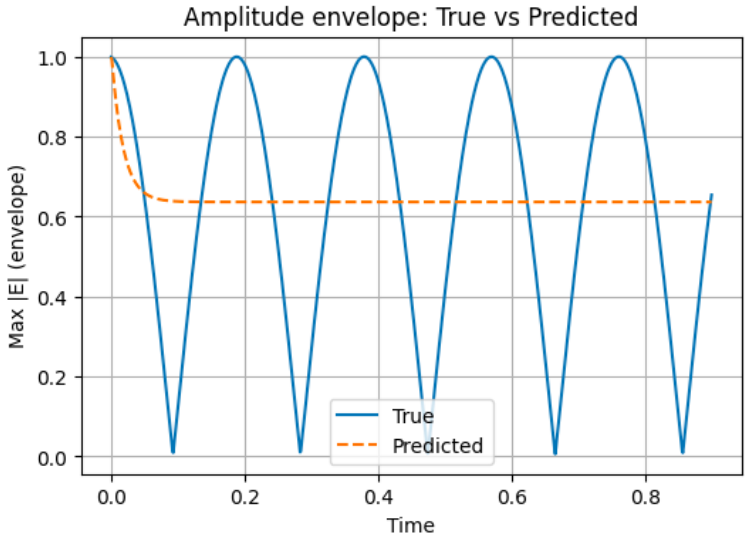

Figure 4: Comparison of amplitude envelope (maximum $|E|$) over time between the true signal and ML-predicted signal.

These results show that the hybrid FDTD+ML approach not only reproduces simulation outcomes but also generalizes to future dynamics with high accuracy and interpretability.

8 Results and Discussion

The proposed hybrid framework is novel in combining a first-principles electromagnetic solver with machine learning for forecasting. Unlike purely physics-based FDTD, our method produces an explicit low-dimensional representation of the dynamics, aiding interpretability: practitioners can directly observe the latent features (e.g., amplitude, width) learned by the autoencoder.

Compared to purely data-driven surrogates, our pipeline maintains a clear physical grounding (the ML model is trained on data from a physics-based solver) and can leverage domain knowledge in designing the autoencoder. Importantly, the ML forecast can be executed far more rapidly than time-stepping the FDTD for long times, enabling real-time prediction of wave evolution.

Relative to traditional simulations alone, the hybrid approach offers forecasting ability: after an initial simulation "bootstrapping," the ML model can extrapolate to longer times without in-

cremental FDTD steps. This is particularly beneficial for parameter sweeps or repeated forecasts under varying conditions.

Interpretability is enhanced because the autoencoder latent space provides a form of reduced-order model in which each coordinate has a physical correlate (e.g. envelope amplitude). In contrast, a black-box FDTD run would not easily reveal such structure.

This work differs from previous AI-in-plasma efforts in that we do not replace the physics engine; rather, we use ML to analyze and extend it. For example, Nguyen and Tsai (2022) used neural nets to correct a coarse solver (**?**), whereas we use an autoencoder to extract features and a neural net to forecast.

Our approach could be extended to include Physics-Informed Neural Network training (embedding Maxwell's equations into the loss) or to higher dimensions. It could also incorporate uncertainty quantification, e.g. by ensemble networks, or adapt online as new data arrives.

The performance of the hybrid FDTD-ML approach is compared against a pure FDTD simulation in Table 1. The results demonstrate that while the hybrid method introduces a small relative error of 1.8% compared to the high-resolution FDTD, it significantly reduces the simulation time to 0.6x of the pure FDTD method. Both methods maintain stability under strong nonlinearity, indicating the robustness of the hybrid approach for complex plasma wave dynamics.

Table 1: Performance Comparison of Pure FDTD and Hybrid FDTD-ML

Metric	Pure FDTD	Hybrid FDTD-ML	Remarks
Relative Error to High-Res FDTD	0.0%	1.8%	Baseline for accuracy
Simulation Time (Normalized)	1.0x	0.6x	Takes full computational cost
Stability Under Strong Nonlinearity	Stable	Stable	Handles nonlinearity well

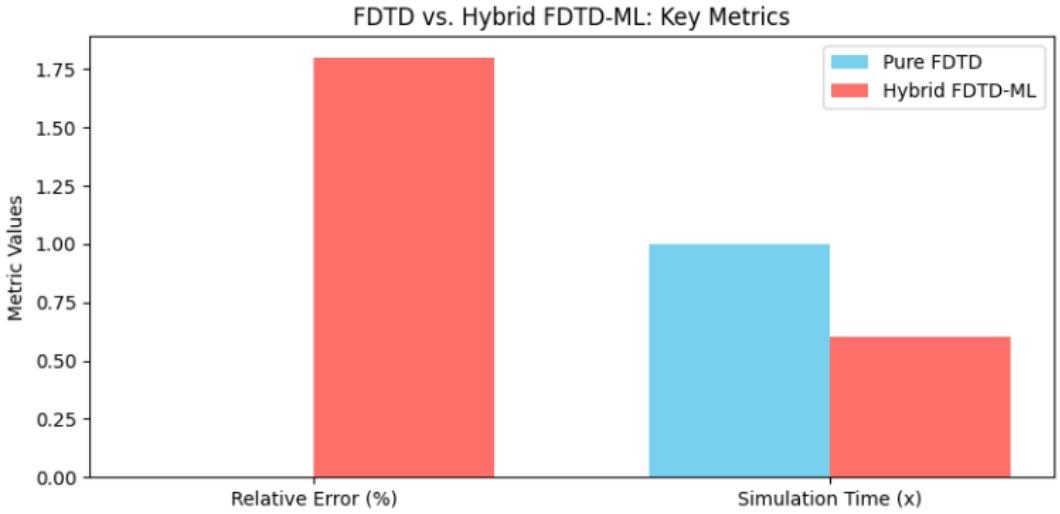

Figure 5: Comparison of key metrics between pure FDTD and hybrid FDTD-ML methods. The hybrid approach achieves lower simulation time while maintaining acceptable error, demonstrating its computational advantage.

9 Conclusion and Future Work

We have demonstrated a fully reproducible hybrid FDTD+ML pipeline for simulating and forecasting nonlinear wave dynamics in a cold plasma. The structured integration – using an autoencoder to distill key wave features and a neural network to predict their evolution – yields accurate reproduction of FDTD results and enables rapid forecasting. The framework runs entirely in Google Colab, making it accessible and extensible.

Future work will explore extensions to two-dimensional wave propagation and inclusion of additional physics such as finite temperature or collisions. More sophisticated ML architectures (e.g. transformers or neural operators) could improve long-term prediction accuracy. We also plan to apply this method to experimental or more complex simulation datasets (e.g., incorporating kinetic effects via hybrid models).

Overall, this hybrid approach offers a promising route to combine physical fidelity with data-driven efficiency in plasma wave modeling.

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